WALL STREET JOURNAL
9 April 1985

We Can't Stop Friend or Foe in the Drug Trade

By Mark Kleiman

The State Department seems to want us to believe that the U.S. drug problem is largely the fault of communist governments and movements that traffic in drugs to make money while weakening the American social fabric. Various congressmen, on the other hand, want to know why the administration has refused to enforce the law that denies U.S. aid and trade concessions to nations failing to act against drug exports when the governments involved are on our side in the Cold War.

There is less to all of this than meets the eye.

Governments, their agencies, their employees and their foreign surrogates are rather frequently involved in drug dealing, because:

- It is a way to make quick, substantial and untraceable money.
- They often need or want money they don't have to account for.
- They have powers, resources, immunities and organizational capabilities that give them advantages in some aspects of drug dealing, and these make them more competitive in moving narcotics than they are in making steel or automobiles.

A Partial Rogue's Gallery

Even governments that do not traffic in drugs can help drug dealing in other ways, either by failing—corruptly, negligently or through incapacity—to prevent production and export of drugs or by creating havens of banking and corporate secrecy, thus helping drug dealers handle their money without getting caught.

None of this is any respecter of ideology. A (very) partial rogue's gallery would have pictures of:

- Bulgarian customs guards reselling seized heroin.
- Colombian colonels protecting marijuana exports.
- Left-wing Colombian M-19 guerrillas financed with cocaine money.
- Right-wing Colombian death squads financed with cocaine money.
- Cayman Islands (U.K.) banking authorities enforcing banking-secrecy laws to conceal drug dealers' assets.
- Afghan mujaheddin growing poppies and selling opium to buy guns.
- The Kuomintang (before 1949) and to this day various Kuomintang "lost armies" in Burma making a living from poppy growing and heroin refining.
- The North Korean diplomatic service financing its embassies by smuggling heroin in diplomatic pouches.
- Anti-Communist Hmong irregulars during the war in Vietnam supporting themselves—with the help of planes from the CIA-backed Air America—by dealing in opium and heroin.
- The Nugan Hand bank (which, if not actually an arm of the U.S. intelligence community, at least had close ties to elements of it) financing heroin deals through Hong Kong.
- The Iranian government conferring retroactive diplomatic immunity on a nephew of the Ayatollah Khomeini caught with a kilogram of heroin in West Germany.
- The Hungarian pharmaceutical industry shipping bulk methaqualone powder under bogus end-use certificates to Colombia to be pressed into counterfeit Quaaludes for the U.S. market.

Other governments implicated in the trade, at least through inaction, include: Pakistan, the Bahamas, Bolivia, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Nicaragua and Mexico. Nor is it only foreign governments that find it difficult to control their law-enforcement machinery: In asking about the role of Mexican police agencies in the death of a U.S. drug agent there, we should not forget our own police and drug homicide scandals in Miami and Puerto Rico.

Among U.S. domestic political groups, both the Rastafarians (a Jamaican religious cult that employs the ritual use of marijuana) and the anti-Castro Omega-7 movement have used drug dealing as a means of support.

Most everyone wants to crack down on drug dealing (except for those libertarians who take their ideology without ice or water). In consequence, when governments tire of accusing each other of torture, murder, genocide and Sabbath-breaking, they call each other dope dealers. It is the one unanswerable charge; even torture, murder and genocide (under euphemisms) have their defenders, but every man's hand is against the pusher.

When unfriendly governments and movements (those unfriendly to us and those to whom we have decided to be unfriendly) are involved in drug dealing, the issue is trumpeted, as in the indictment of a sitting minister of the Cuban government. Similar behavior by friendly governments and movements is handled quietly; we did finally ask for the extradition of a member of the Argentinian military government, but only after Raul Alfonsin's election as civilian president.

The Drug Enforcement Administration and intelligence-community reports implicating unfriendly governments become the basis of congressional testimony. Similar reports about friendly governments are marked "Top Secret." Nor can this really be called an abuse of the classification system: it would, in fact, damage U.S. security interests to publish the fact that the government of X, whose troops we are training to bait the Bear, is up to its medals in the drug trade or the money-laundering business, and that the U.S. government says so.

It is fashionable to say that we should put more pressure on foreign governments to stop the drug trade. This raises three questions: Would the pressure be successful? If so, would there be any effect on our drug problem? What other interests would we have to sacrifice? In my view, the answers are, respectively: probably not in most cases; almost certainly not, and, far more than we would care to.

Our influence with foreign governments is a scarce resource to be economized. Even ignoring foreign policy, and even from a strictly selfish point of view, we probably have a stronger interest in the farm policies, per-capita rates of gross national product and public-health measures of most foreign governments than we have in their drug exports. Better that Mexico should ship us more oil than less marijuana. Haiti's thugs in uniform and thieves in office threaten U.S. interests far more profoundly than do Jamaica's government-tolerated drug producers and smugglers. Who would seriously propose cutting off arms to Afghanistan until the freedom fighters stop growing opium?

Drug enforcement and drug-abuse prevention can be useful tools of foreign policy when they serve the needs of a foreign government or help political forces friendly to us. But the U.S. drug problem has to be solved in this country, with enforcement, prevention and treatment.

The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 didn't repeal the law of supply and demand. There are so many potential sources that the drugs are going to come from somewhere, and the import price of drugs is so low as a fraction of final consumer price that foreign actions won't make drugs significantly more expensive.

The typical "victory" in the foreign-source control program remains the Mexican marijuana eradication program. Spraying the herbicide Paraquat on Mexican marijuana fields virtually eliminated Mexico as a source of marijuana for the U.S. market, less by destroying the crops

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